Building Community Sustainability Indicator Reports

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Abstract

This paper will substantially draw on the experience and results of a provincial pilot initiative to help BC communities develop locally relevant ways of measuring their progress towards sustainability. Two of the pilot projects were within the Georgia Basin region—New Westminster and Sunshine Coast; and two were outside of the region—Clayoquot Sound and Quesnel. It assumes that making progress towards sustainability requires local level approaches. This paper will examine key factors in developing a local sustainability indicator report that can lead to action. Key points to be raised and discussed include:

- How communities can use "science" or indicator data provided by experts to better understand local environmental, social and economic conditions.

- The value of having community indicator project managed by a steering committee of local leaders so people of diverse backgrounds, with resources, can share perspectives to develop a common understanding of local conditions and issues.

- The appropriate role of higher levels of government in terms providing support, mentoring and data to help communities build local reports.

- The importance of ensuring that indicator reports include both positive and negative trends so that communities understand where they need to make progress and what they need to protect.

Introduction

This paper discusses an approach for pulling together indicator knowledge at the local level, across disciplines, into a comprehensive sustainability report. The purpose of which is to encourage dialogue and relationship building between community interests; and ultimately, improved decision-making. This paper is intended to contribute to the discussion about how communities can use indicator data "science" to better understand local environmental, social and economic conditions. In terms of the kind of process that can be used for building an indicator report, this paper looks at the value of having community indicator project managed by a diverse steering committee of local leaders. It also comments on the appropriate role of higher levels of government, in terms of providing support, mentoring and data to help communities build local sustainability indicator reports.

Background

Progressing towards sustainability requires action and monitoring at all levels and needs to consider all dimensions—economic, social and environmental. There are a considerable number of indicator initiatives in BC at the provincial and regional scale including a B.C.-Washington cross-border report on environmental trends in the bioregion. This paper talks about developing community level indicator reports. It is based on the experience of a provincial pilot initiative to help BC communities develop locally relevant ways of measuring their progress towards sustainability.

It is important to mention that a new provision in the *Community Charter* will require local governments to report annually to residents on the progress they have made towards their goals. The *Community Charter* is new legislation, now before the B.C. Provincial Legislature for debate and passage, altering the legal framework for municipalities in the province. The new reporting provision in the legislation creates an opportunity for communities to further explore the development of local sustainability indicator reports.

BC Provincial Pilot Initiative

The community indicator pilot initiative was launched in the fall of 2000 and concluded in the spring of 2002 under the Ministry of Community, Aboriginal and Women's Services (Ministry). Five communities/regions were chosen, representing a range of rural, coastal and urban places. The purpose of the initiative was to learn how communities could use evidence-based planning, to enhance local, social, economic and environmental outcomes. To help design and implement this initiative, the Ministry pulled together a provincial steering committee and also hired a consultant to develop a guidebook for the pilot leaders.

With financial support from the Ministry along with a consultant ready to help with local project animation, proponent organizations were chosen for each community and asked to do five basic things:

1. Establish a local Steering Committee for the project.
2. Develop a draft report as a public engagement tool.
3. Produce a final draft report.
4. Circulate the final draft to raise discussion on potential action items, and issues.
5. Locate an institutional home for the project.

Steering Committee Approach

The Ministry's vision was for each project to be guided by a local steering committee of representatives from a broad range of community interests. This consultative mechanism was seen to be a way to link together agencies with access to indicator data and knowledge but perhaps more importantly, to bring groups and leaders together with resources and decision-making purview that could make a difference locally. Suggested organizations on the steering committee would include:

1. Municipal and regional government.
2. First Nations.
3. School board.
4. Police department.
5. Health and social service agencies.
6. The business community.
7. Local environmental organizations.
8. Non-profit groups.

Pilot Communities in the Georgia Basin

Three of the pilot projects were within the Georgia Basin region—Powell River, Sechelt and New Westminster. Two were outside of the region—Alberni-Clayoquot and Quesnel. This paper is focused on the projects within the Georgia Basin. What follows is a brief overview on each community along with the results of each of the projects.

Powell River

Powell River is resource-based town incorporated in 1910. The community located on the coastal mainland about five hours north of Vancouver by car and ferry. The local economy is primarily dependent on forestry in the surrounding mainland region, fishing in Georgia Straight and mining on Texada Island. The combined population of the both the municipality and region is about 18,000—a decrease from 20,000 in 1976. In recent years, the decline in forestry and fishing has hit the community hard so local efforts have been focused on building a stronger economy.

Sechelt

Also on the coastal mainland but closer to Vancouver is Sechelt—a relatively short ferry ride from Horseshoe Bay. Resource development—including forestry and fishing and some agriculture – has supported the local economy in the past with tourism and recreation becoming increasingly important. About 28,000 people live in the region and the population is growing. Along with Sechelt there is also the town of Gibson, the Sechelt Indian Government District and a number of rural areas within the region. Lack of coordinated economic planning and promotion has been seen to be a barrier to local and regional sustainable development.

New Westminster

Founded in 1860, the City of New Westminster is one of BC's oldest post-contact communities. It's located in the heart of the GVRD on the Fraser River with a population of 55,000. New Westminster is a vibrant city with arts and sports. It also has one of the higher levels of socio-economic stress in the Lower Mainland.

Results of the Pilots

The chart below provides a general overview of the relative success of each of the projects, in terms of completing the tasks suggested by the Ministry within the given time frame. A more detailed description of the results follows.

Project	Tasks					
	Establish Steering Committee	Develop a draft indicator report/ framework	Consult more widely with the public	Final Report Completed	Action taken as a result of the report	Permanent home identified for future reporting
New Westminster	✔	✔	✔	✔	½	½
Sechelt	✔	✔	½	✘	✘	✘
Powell River	✔	½	✘	✘	✘	✘
✔ = full completion ½ = partial completion ✘ = no work undertaken for this task						

Figure 2. Completion Chart

Powell River

The lead organization for this project was the Coastal Community Network (CCN) and the main contact for the project was the Executive Coordinator for the CCN based in Victoria. The CCN was able to bring together a steering committee consisting of a number of organizations including: local college, health authority, economic development society, regional district and First Nations and others.

The work of the CCN, with the support of the Steering Committee and the results of a community survey, amounted to the development of a framework for building a report with 12 themes covering the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainability. The framework included challenges, goals and potential indicators for each of the nine key themes identified (see Appendix One for a list of the themes):

At this point in time a final report has not been completed and there does not seem to be much interest in the community in going any further. In community development work timing can be a key factor. The same time the indicator project was underway, Powell River was focused on finding ways to help the economy recover from the permanent closure of the Norske Canada kraft pulp mill. This had resulted in the loss of 280 jobs and a decrease in the local tax base. To their credit, the company had provided the community with $3 million in economic development support.

While the CCN was trying to move the indicator project forward, Powell River was focused on creating an economic development society and an economic plan for the community. There was interest in indicators but this was overshadowed by their more pressing priority. Timing can be everything—the project in Powell River was launched at the wrong time, when the community was focused on economic development. Capacity is also factor—in smaller communities there is only so much volunteer energy available at any given time.

Sechelt

Things went much differently in Sechelt than in Powell River. While a report has not yet been completed, work is ongoing along a continuum established by the pilot project and at a pace that has been driven by the community. This project was also led by the CCN with the Chair (also mayor of Sechelt) as the lead contact.

Going into the project, the mayor realized that he really had three solitudes in the community—environmental activists, social organizations and economic development groups—and he needed to find a way to bring them together. His vision has been to slowly bring these groups together to develop a common understanding of local issues and trends to build the basis for a sustainability framework and report that would tie the three streams together.

A steering committee was formed with representatives from local government, the School District the Health Authority and other organizations. The Steering Committee first suggested that a review be undertaken of all the various reports and processes already underway or completed. This review was undertaken by District of Sechelt staff and resulted in a detailed inventory of social, economic and environmental goals as an important resource for the project.

From this point there were three separate forums held to look at the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainability. Those three streams were brought together at a workshop in October 2003 that has resulted in the development of a common integrated framework that has formed the basis for the development of a sustainability report card (See Appendix Two for more detail). The framework identifies the key issues the community needs to focus on and how those issues intersect with social, economic and environmental interests. While a final report was not completed in this community, work is advancing towards that end through an indicator working group made up of local organizations.

New Westminster

The New Westminster project was lead by the New Westminster Community Skills Development Society (NWCSDS). The society was successful in bringing together a diverse group of interests to help steer the project to conclusion. The Steering Committee included representatives from the city planning department, New West City Police, School District, Health Authority and local social service agencies.

A draft report was produced as a tool to consult more widely with the community before the completion of a final report with 14 indicators to cover social, environmental and economic trends in the community. A letter of support accompanied the final report from the local Member of the Provincial Legislative Assembly, the Honourable Joyce Murray, Minister of Water Land and Air Protection. To help communicated the results of the report the society printed over 1,500 brochure style documents to widely circulate the results.

In terms of follow-up to the report, the society is currently working on developing an integrated approach to dealing with two issues raised in the report—poverty and waste reduction—and has agreed to be the institutional home for the report for now, although funding will be needed for the development and publication of the next report.

Of all the three projects, New Westminster was the most successful within the time frame (about a year) allotted to the projects. Sechelt is still a work in progress. The graphic below illustrates the range of success between the three projects. Based on the experience in New Westminster and Sechelt, key success factors seem to include:

- Having a lead organization that is well-respected and established community group with capacity to host the project.
- Involving local groups that work well together and are willing to volunteer their time in support of the project.

Range of Success Between the Projects
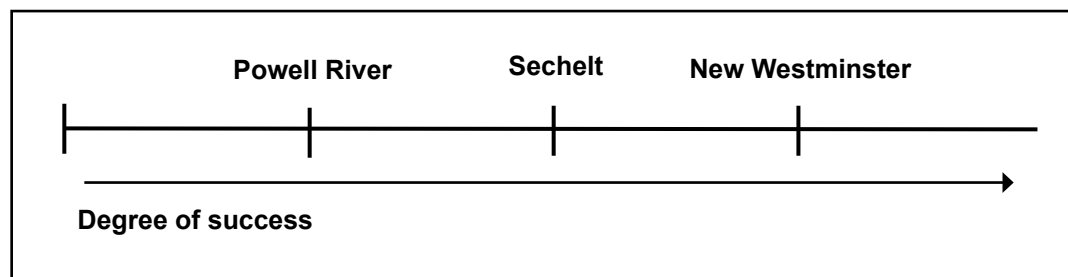
What Can Other Communities Learn From These Projects?

With a steering committee managing an indicator project, people of diverse backgrounds have the opportunity to share perspectives to develop a common understanding of local conditions (New West, Sechelt). But indicator development may not always work in every area, particularly in communities not committed to the work (Powell River). Even if there is a local interest, in today's tight fiscal environment finding resources to continue community progress assessment work and publish periodic (annual or biannual reports) can be challenging.

It is too early to tell whether the effort at indicator development in each of the three pilot communities will result in improved policy-making, but the evidence suggests that the process can strengthen relations between decision-makers and clarify key local issues. The successful pilot projects were in communities with strong support from local leaders, significant local research capacity, experience in community development work and good relations between key officials. The main lessons from these pilot projects are that: (1) not all communities are willing and able to develop the comprehensive indicators that would be useful for policy-making; (2) the communities that do have the capacity need to work at their own pace; and (3) even if the indicators themselves are not put to immediate and extensive use in policy-making, the process of developing them can be beneficial in terms of building local capacity.

Lessons for Senior Levels of Government

This experience has identified a few key lessons for senior levels of government that choose to take an interest in supporting local indicator development:

- The indicator development process seems to work best in communities that are interested and prepared to undertake work.
- Communities follow their own pace that may not be in step with senior level timelines.
- These projects require a significant investment in time and resources.

Conclusions

The development of an indicator report will not always makes sense and is not always going to work in every community. To increase the chances for success communities have to have the capacity and interest (including support from local leadership) for undertaking the work. Indicators do have the potential to influence decision-makers at the local level—but we have to expect that immediate results for first time reports will usually be minor. Witnessing first hand the projects in New Westminster and Sechelt, we need to appreciate that the main value in the exercise is helping to build relations between community leaders through the sharing information and discussion about their community. One can imagine that the simple process of sharing information between agencies—school district, city planning department, police detachment, health authority—can help people get a better overall sense of local conditions and generate thought as to where interests/policies/activities intersect highlighting opportunities for collaboration.

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Appendix One

Key Themes of the Powell River Draft Sustainability Framework

- Partnering and Community Engagement
- Education and Training
- Heritage and Landmarks
- Supporting Healthier Communities
- Supporting Safer Communities
- Equity
- Community Attraction and Growth
- Successful Economic Activity and Employment
- Business Diversification
- Awareness and Access to Financing
- Clean Protected Environment
- Management of Renewable Resources

Appendix Two

Integration Framework for Sustainability on the Sunshine Coast

	SUSTAINABILITY THEMES		
Goals	**Social**	**Economic**	**Environment**
1. Protection of water for public consumption.	Equitable and collective access to water ensures social well being.	Stable supply of water for consumption is essential for economic development.	Protection of water sources enhances ecological stability and maintains diversity
2. Increase public awareness of, and commitment to, sustainability.	Shared vision of community commitments and common goals strengthens social ties.	Ensures that decisions regarding economic issues support sustainability.	Public commitment will provide assured protection of environment.
3. Access to affordable and adequate housing, with choices of tenure.	Housing is a basic necessity for healthy individuals living together in community.	Ensures economic resources are well allocated. Positive impact on population.	May reduce industrial impact on environment; will reduce unsustainable demands on environment.
4. Maintain and restore the natural diversity of our ecosystems.	Natural context for living will influence social capital.	Natural capital provides the foundation for economic activity.	Ensures sustainability of environment.
5. Integration of a thriving economy with protection of our environment and cultural heritage.	Ensures that economy supports existing social forms and protects cultural heritage.	Sustainability of economic activity is built upon existing environment and culture	Ensures that environment is unharmed by economic activity. Integration supports sustainability.
6.Access to an adequate (and nutritious) food supply	Ensures good health and community well being.	Ensures appropriate allocation of economic resources and healthy working population.	Reduces negative impacts of agriculture and industry devoted to consumption of junk food.
7. Improvement in local infrastructure to enhance quality and sustainability of life.	Infrastructure directly enhances community life and strengthens social ties.	Improved infrastructure enhances economic activity and may attract new resources (people & investment)	Improvements to infrastructure will reduce existing negative impacts on environment (road use, liquid and solid waste, operation of community facilities).
8. Access to individually rewarding and meaningful work	Improves mental and physical health of community members, will reduce social stress	Ensures optimal productivity of workforce, and optimal allocation of human resources.	Reduced social stress and optimal economic allocation may reduce 'attacks' on natural eco-systems; i.e., random vandalism, garbage and trash disposal, pollution.
9. Coordination of economic development activities with policies and decisions of local governments.	Coordination will reduce social dissonance and misplaced social capital.	Ensures appropriate economic development and optimal use of economic resources.	Coordination will reduce demands on environment and ensure that environment is protected to levels of sustainability set by community.

Appendix Three

Overview of New Westminster Indicators

Indicator	Status	Description
Theme: Environment		
1. Parkways and Greenways	Green Light	There is lots of green space in the city.
2. Waste Diverted from Landfills	Red Light	Amount of waste going to landfill needs to be reduced.
3. Transportation Modal Share	Green Light	New West residents are walking, cycling and taking the bus more.
4. Traffic Volume	Red Light	There is too much traffic moving through New Westminster every day
5. Drinking Water Quality	Green Light	Very clean drinking water.
Theme: Social		
6. Education Level	Amber Light	New West citizens don't seem to be staying in school long enough – more information needed to clarify.
7. Income Assistance Participation Rates	Red Light	Too many citizens currently receive of income assistance
8. Housing Affordability	Amber Light	Many citizens may not have affordable housing. More information needed to clarify.
9. Accessibility for People with Special Needs	Amber Light	More information needed on the accessibility of public space for people with special needs (measured in numbers of curb cuts and audible traffic signals).
10. Crime Rates	Green Light	Crime Rates are going down significantly
Theme: Economy		
11. Unemployment Rate	Amber Light	More information needed but current data seems to suggest the New West unemployment rate is comparatively high.
12. Jobs-to-Employable Ratio	Green Light	The New Westminster "jobs to employable adults" ratio is the 5th best in the Lower Mainland
13. Economic Activity: • Number of Jobs • Number of Business Licenses • Value of Building permits	Amber Light Amber Light Red Light	Census 2001 information needed to clarify job creation trend. Further information needed to establish trend. Value of building permits decreased between 1995-98.
14. Average Family Income	Green Light	From 1989 – 1996, the average family income in New Westminster rose 12%.